



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Regional Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into the Better Use of Public and
Community Sector Funds for the Delivery of
Bus Transport in Northern Ireland: North
Coast Community Transport Briefing

16 January 2013

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Bus Transport in Northern Ireland: North Coast Community Transport Briefing

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Jimmy Spratt (Chairperson)
Mr John Dallat
Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr Ian McCrea
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

Witnesses:

Ms Thelma Dillon	North Coast Community Transport
Ms Marie McGinnis	North Coast Community Transport
Mr Billy Moore	North Coast Community Transport

The Chairperson: I welcome representatives of North Coast Community Transport (NCCT): Billy Moore, who is its manager; Marie McGinnis, who is its director; and Thelma Dillon, who is the chairperson of the Causeway Older Active Strategic Team (COAST). You are very welcome to the Committee. You have 10 minutes in which to make a presentation, and then I ask that you leave yourselves open to questions.

Mr Billy Moore (North Coast Community Transport): Thank you. This will be a team effort. I will start by giving a short introduction about myself. I have been in post as manager of North Coast Community Transport for almost seven years. I was involved in one of the Department for Regional Development (DRD) rural transport funds pilot projects — Dial a Lift — before the service was rolled out across the Province. I worked with the Department on the development of the transport scheduling software, which was then introduced to all rural community partnerships delivering rural transport fund (RTF) services. I serve on the committee of COAST with Thelma, and I also serve on the committee of Be Safe, Be Well (BSBW) in Limavady.

Ms Marie McGinnis (North Coast Community Transport): I am the director and a volunteer committee member. I have helped to guide the company over the past six years. I have extensive experience of working with older people in my role with Ageing Well Roe Valley over 10 years, and I was instrumental in securing £1 million of lottery funding for the Be Safe, Be Well project, which was rolled out in Limavady borough, running various programmes for disadvantaged people.

Ms Thelma Dillon (North Coast Community Transport): As the Chairperson said, I am chair of the Causeway Older Active Strategic Team. COAST is a subregional network and has been working in partnership to plan the way forward to serve the best interests of older people in the Limavady, Moyle, Ballymoney and Coleraine council areas. COAST works in partnership with statutory, community and voluntary organisations across a wide range of service areas, including health, housing, education,

transport and local government. Our aim is to improve the quality of life, health and well-being of older people in those areas and to promote equal access to services. We are a voice for older people.

Ms McGinnis: I will give you a bit of background about North Coast Community Transport. It was formed in 2000 and was originally known as Roe Valley Rural Transport, covering the Limavady borough. The name was changed in October 2010 when we were asked by DRD to deliver rural transport fund services in the Moyle and Ballymena boroughs. It expanded again in April 2011 when we were asked to deliver services in Coleraine and Ballymoney boroughs. NCCT is a registered charity and operates as a not-for-profit organisation. We have achieved Investors in People and Investors in Volunteers awards, and we now have offices in Limavady and Ballycastle.

We currently have 3,000 individuals registered for the Dial a Lift service and 650 registered groups. Passengers are mainly older people, people with disabilities and those living in rural areas who are unable to access or use conventional public or private transport.

Last year, we completed approximately 165,000 passenger trips, and we currently operate a fleet of 20 accessible minibuses. For larger groups, we also have access to larger coaches by working in partnership with various private operators.

We employ 35 people either on a full-time or casual basis and have 25 volunteer car drivers, who are registered with our organisation, assisting with the delivery of our Dial a Lift service.

We are in the process of developing our trading arm to help generate additional funds to support our charitable work. We have five in-house trainers who carry out various transport-related courses, ensuring that all drivers, office staff, board members and volunteers receive the relevant training.

Ms Dillon: I will deal with the issue of assessing public and community bus transport requirements. Owing to the lack of available information, it is difficult to comment on the public transport delivered by Translink. However, NCCT, as part of its recent efficiencies, always tries to link passengers to the mainline service of Translink, thus avoiding unnecessary duplication.

NCCT's membership continues to grow, showing the need for isolated individuals to access shops, local healthcare, recreation, education and church. Indications show a 20% increase on last year's passenger trips, and that is typical of growth over the past five years. We also link isolated individuals to mainline Translink services for travel outside our operational area.

We are an ageing society, which explains the continued annual growth in membership, passenger trips and the need for the service.

Mr Moore: I will deal with the issue of assessing current public and community sector bus transport infrastructure and costs. NCCT receives grant funding from DRD to provide Dial a Lift services, while the urban Door-2-Door scheme is tendered for and provided by private operators. We believe that integration of those services would prove more cost-effective by utilising current resources.

NCCT's operational area includes four urban towns. Our vehicles and volunteer car drivers are constantly in those towns with rural clients and could easily accommodate the additional urban clients, thus providing huge savings. By integrating services, NCCT believes that double the current urban Door-2-Door trips could be provided with the same budget.

A review of the urban Door-2-Door scheme may show that tendering is not the most effective solution for the delivery of DRD services and that it has a negative impact on the user. Non-viable routes delivered by Translink could be an option for community transport, using smaller vehicles and linking to mainline service routes. That could prove a more cost-effective use of public funds. However, DRD has already confirmed that applications for a route permit will be limited to commercial, profit-making companies only.

Ms McGinnis: I will deal with the issue of assessing current interrelationships in the delivery of public and community bus operations. NCCT links clients to mainline Translink services where possible, ensuring efficient use of public funds. It works with Translink to provide better access to hospitals in the Coleraine and Ballymena areas. NCCT believes that consideration should be given to having bus stops close to each hospital, allowing individuals to access appointments.

Ms Dillon: I will deal with the issue of identifying best practice in the provision of integrated public and community bus transport options. NCCT believes that it demonstrates best practice for transport delivery in the north coast area by working in partnership with Translink, the private sector and voluntary and community organisations.

For large group travel, we engage with several private operators. Last year, NCCT passed £20,000 worth of business to private operators. In addition, we have assessed £25,000 worth of applications to the rural transport fund voucher scheme, again supporting the private operator.

For small groups, we encourage volunteers to train as drivers for their groups, thus reducing the cost of travel. For Dial a Lift services, we use our minibuses and our volunteer car scheme to deliver the most cost-effective and flexible transport solutions.

The volunteer car scheme currently delivers 36% of Dial a Lift services, thus reducing the cost to the public purse. That commitment will be lost if DRD decides to tender the service.

NCCT receives 20,000 volunteer hours a year. The Department of the Environment's (DOE) proposed changes to licensing could also have a huge impact on how services are delivered in future. Volunteering in the sector as we know it would cease to exist. The cost per trip would increase, resulting in fewer trips for the same money.

Mr Moore: I will deal with considering options for the future provision of public and community bus transport. We want to ensure that continued financial support is made available to community transport suppliers to meet the needs of individuals who find it difficult or impossible to access local services because of the lack of appropriate transport.

We want to engage with other Departments to consider integrating services with better use of resources. For example, the amalgamation of DRD's public transport budget with the money that is spent on transport by the Health and Education Departments would create the opportunity for better planning of resources. It would provide a better service for the public, reduce duplication and integrate transport to create huge savings.

We want to engage with DOE to ensure that the proposed changes to operator licensing do not have a negative impact on the most vulnerable in society and the voluntary sector. We want to address the procurement of services, and we understand that, on occasion, tendering may not be the most appropriate or cost-effective option.

The Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation. It does not surprise me, nor will it surprise any other member of the Committee that, in your presentation, you mentioned the lack of transparency and the unavailability of information from Translink. I assume that, as is normal with this Committee and with Members who ask questions in this place, you come up against the commercial confidentiality clause that Translink trots out fairly regularly when it does not want to be transparent or answer questions.

How does that affect your day-to-day business as a community transport provider? Were that information available to you, to what extent would it allow you to provide better services? Translink has no competition, so with no competition it can simply go behind that cover, time after time. There is not a member at this table who has not received similar answers to questions that they have posed to the Department or to Translink on a plethora of finance issues whenever its representatives have appeared before this Committee. Much of Translink's money comes from the public purse, and the relevant information should be open, clear and transparent to us all. What are your views on Translink in that regard?

Mr Moore: I need to be careful because I do not know enough in depth about Translink, which is a large organisation. I can talk only from an NCCT perspective. We are currently having meetings with Translink in the Moyle council area. We are trying to be more efficient by not taking people to the Causeway Hospital, which is outside the Moyle district, and therefore we need to link to Translink's services.

Those meetings take place regularly and are proving to be productive. However, as Thelma can attest to, the problem is that the service takes people to Coleraine bus station and not to the hospital. I said that we should look at having bus stops at the hospital so that people can have access. If DRD is saying that Dial a Lift cannot take them that distance, how do they get there? We are quite happy to

link them. However, they must get closer to the hospital. People who are ill cannot have three or four stops before they get to their appointment.

The Chairperson: Are you saying that there are no stops at the hospital?

Mr Moore: What a patient has to do is go to Coleraine bus station. Then, every half hour, a bus that passes the hospital leaves the bus station. I am saying that the last stop before going to the bus station should be the hospital.

The Chairperson: Absolutely. It is appalling that that is not the case.

Mr Moore: If that were the case, it would tie in with what we are trying to achieve, which is more efficiencies by linking to Translink. We are more than happy to do so.

The Chairperson: Billy, what excuses does Translink give on that particular issue? I assume that some of you have raised the stop issue?

Mr Moore: I am not sure that "excuses" is the right word. What I can say is that discussions are ongoing. We have raised the issue, and Translink has looked at it. It said that it will look at it again. I believe that there is a bus stop at Antrim Area Hospital, which is fantastic. However, I am fighting for one in Coleraine. We are saying that we cannot do it. We are getting grief from MLAs and councillors as to why we are not doing it. If we were linked to Translink, it must be able to provide that. If it wants to provide it, it needs to have a bus stop at the hospital.

The Chairperson: If you travel in places, such as Edinburgh, where there is a good transport system, you see that buses go through hospital grounds to drop people off.

Mr Moore: That is a great idea.

The Chairperson: For how long have you been trying to resolve that issue with Translink?

Mr Moore: I was introduced to it only around three or four meetings back. I know that Moyle District Council has been having meetings with Translink for quite a while. Yes, it is slow. I am not sure why decisions are made or who makes decisions on whether there should be a bus stop at the hospital. At our most recent meeting, we were told that Translink would look at it. Hopefully, when we have our next meeting, it may have an answer for us.

Ms Dillon: I would like to come in on that, Chair. Our concern is for the isolated, lonely person in the glens who may live a mile away from the nearest bus stop. How does that person get to the bus stop? That is why the Dial a Lift service, which is run by volunteers, is essential to the rural community.

The Chairperson: It is absolutely appalling. I think that that hospital is one of the newest in Northern Ireland. It is just appalling that public transport — all bus services — does not, at some point, go through the grounds. Do the buses that travel to Belfast stop at the hospital?

Mr Moore: That service is the bus that leaves the station every half hour and stops at the hospital. It means that the patient has to go to the bus station in Coleraine and wait on that bus to go to the hospital. I do not think that that should be the case.

The Chairperson: No. It is absolutely appalling. I agree with you.

What issues, if any, have emerged that are an impediment to the trial programme that you are running with Translink? How would you remedy those issues?

Mr Moore: Do you mean the trial programme from Ballycastle to Coleraine?

The Chairperson: Yes, that trial programme, not the one that we have just discussed.

Mr Moore: Again, I think that that is the only issue. I do not think that there is any other issue. If there were that bus stop in the Coleraine hospital grounds, and buses from the glens and Ballycastle stopped there, that would solve a lot of problems. As I said, there is already a stop at Antrim Area

Hospital. I do not know about other hospitals throughout the country. Certainly, the Coleraine hospital needs a bus stop. That is it. I do not have any other real issues or meetings about issues with Translink at this time.

The Chairperson: Members, one thing that we need to put very clearly and formally on the record is that Translink and the Department should tap formally into any planning, particularly for a hospital or suchlike. Obviously, that is not being done, but it certainly should be done. We need to put that on the record formally.

Finally, before I pass to someone else, have you heard the term "commercial confidentiality"? Do you recognise that term? Does Translink hide behind it and not give transparent answers?

Mr Moore: The information that we as a company take from Translink is very limited. Yes, perhaps, we have heard the term. However, it has not really affected North Coast Community Transport. I know that, from the point of view of transparency, we are funded by the same body — DRD's transport fund. We are audited, so we have to have financial returns and to record absolutely everything, down to the last detail, about what we do with our funds. I have no problem with that; that is exactly how it should be done. However, again, I cannot comment on Translink's reporting or confidentiality procedures.

The Chairperson: I agree with you that that is the way that it should be done. That is the way that Translink should be doing it as well. That is an issue that this Committee will keep banging on about.

Mr Dickson: Thank you very much for coming to us and for being very helpful. I congratulate you on the service that you deliver, particularly as that is done by volunteers.

You raised with us two areas of your submission. The Chair perhaps dealt with one of them, which is a lack of information from Translink. You are trying to link passengers into mainline services, and I guess that most of that relates to the hospital issue. Are there other mainline services that you find it difficult to link passengers to?

The second area concerns community planning. If and when the local government reforms go through, the new councils will have community planning responsibilities. Do you think that that would be useful, and do you want to become involved in it? Do think that Translink should also be a player in it?

Mr Moore: If I can just take your second point first, I think that that would be very useful and that Translink should be involved in it. All transport suppliers, including us, should be involved in it. At times, taxis are better options, and community transport is better at other times. We have to investigate them all, which is the only way to get the right answer. Above all, we are doing this not to tick a box but to ensure that the people's needs are met. That is the key in all this. At too many of the meetings that we have attended with high-ranking officials from DOE, DRD or wherever, I have not heard enough talked about the needs of the people. The talk is about procurement policies and this legislation and that. Surely while doing all that, we have to think about the needs of the people, because the bottom line is that that is who we are trying to serve.

Could you please repeat the first part of your question?

Mr Dickson: It was about the connection with Translink and how co-operative it is with you in linking passengers into its mainline services.

Mr Moore: It is OK. Mr Dallat made a point in the previous presentation about the public transport service. Once the school stops, there is very little in rural areas. There is little or nothing. I looked around your area, and I found that the likes of Feeny and Magilligan and such places do not get enough services at all. We are more than happy to be involved more in linking into the mainline services, and I think that it would be more cost-effective if we could be involved in that. I was here last week, and I think that one of the MLAs who sits on this Committee said that that was a no-brainer. That is exactly what it is.

Mr Ó hOisín: Thank very much you, Billy, Marie and Thelma. As a former mayor of the borough of Limavady, I am acutely aware of all the issues that you have brought up to the Committee. I am aware of the good work that you have done down through the years and, indeed, of the difficulties that

you have had in tying together services between Translink and yourselves. I met with Translink as recently as last Friday to discuss the same issue. It seems as though you are servicing the service routes, but it seems that it is not servicing anything whatsoever that you are doing.

I am also interested, naturally, in finding out what sort of preparatory work might have been done with a view to looking at a pilot scheme that has come out of Dungannon and Cookstown. I was surprised and disappointed to find out that very little has been done on that count. The Chair and Mr Dickson obviously brought out those points. The issue is relevant not only to the Causeway Hospital at Coleraine but to Altnagelvin. Someone living in, say, Park village has to take three buses to get to Altnagelvin, which is just over 10 miles away. That is a very unsatisfactory situation. However, I do not want to labour that point, because other members have done that already.

Could I just say about the training that you have provided down through the years that I was very privileged to have done the MiDAS training twice with you. I know how important that is with voluntary and community groups, GAA clubs, Churches and all the rest of it. That is essential. In real terms, what impact would the change to licensing have? Are we talking numbers? What impact would that have on the provision of that level of transport in the voluntary and community sector, particularly in rural areas?

Mr Moore: At this moment, of the changes proposed by the DOE, licensing is probably our biggest fear. I believe that this is a box-ticking exercise at times and that the needs of the people have not been thought about at all.

In our presentation, we mentioned that we think that we have a really good example of best practice on the north coast. In Ballycastle and in the glens of Antrim, we have a huge number of volunteer drivers who drive for local groups such as footballers, etc. That service reduces the costs, which is how they can afford to operate. If they had to pay for commercial licensing, they could not afford to provide that. For example, our volunteers can deliver Dial-a-Lift for what we pay them, which is at an average of £5.51 a trip. These are rural areas, so you must understand the miles that they have to cover. Our volunteers do 1,270 passenger trips a month in the northern coast area. If we were to go commercial, that would be lost. My fear is that, if that were taken up on a commercial basis, only the same budget would be available, so you would not get 1,270 trips. That would mean that the number could reduce. So, that will not meet the needs of the people. We need to do this in the most efficient and cost-effective way, which is what we aim to do.

We have been through mergers in the Coleraine and north Antrim areas. A transition period is involved, and that takes time. We have found that our costs have dropped dramatically from last year to this, and I can see that as we recruit volunteers. We are on a recruitment drive at the moment in the Kilrea, Garvagh and Ballymoney areas, which were low in volunteer numbers. So, we can again reduce the cost-per-trip figure for the Department. Does that answer your question?

Mr Ó hOisín: I think that there is a recurring theme in all the presentations that we have had: the co-ordination of transport provision across the board. I think that it is incumbent on us to drill down into that. Thank you, Bill.

Mr I McCrea: Thank you for your presentation. Following on from what was asked previously, I firmly believe that community transport should be more about the people rather than the service telling people where they can go, what type of trips are available and whether they can or cannot take people who live in certain parts to hospital appointments that are beyond certain distances.

I think that things have gone a wee bit mad with some of those decisions. We have to more or less work with what is there, but that does not take away from our considering this matter and looking at how people get access to public transport, whether it is through community transport or being taken to a bus station and having to find your own way, which is a lot more difficult and a lot less personal. The good work that you and other community transport associations comes in by giving that personal touch to people.

I will get to my question, before I am frowned upon.

The Chairperson: I am just about to remind you.

Mr I McCrea: In delivering all this and in taking into consideration the mergers that have taken place and that are taking place, in the desire to make efficiencies, have you seen a model of good practice on how this could be delivered that would make sure that people get the best service?

Mr Moore: Do you mean only community transport?

Mr I McCrea: I mean community transport and how it merges into the wider provision.

Mr Moore: There used to be 19 community transport areas. DRD is trying to get that down to seven, so it now funds seven areas. I was always in favour of that, and I believe that it has shown efficiencies. Through greater flexibility in the use of vehicles throughout the areas, we now find that less money is spent for more services. We were £44,000 less well off last year, but we are going to do 6,500 more trips. That is simply because of the efficiencies that the Department asked us to concentrate on. We are playing ball with the Department by doing that. Salaries alone from the old three partnerships have reduced by £97,000 a year. From April to November this year, the difference in what we can pay out to volunteers for their costs can give us annual savings of £42,500 a year. So, the integration of all that, with different areas coming together and working as a bigger organisation, can help us to reduce the cost. Does that answer your question?

Mr I McCrea: It does in a sense. I think that the theme that we should integrate all these services is coming out loud and clear.

Mr Moore: I will follow that up by saying that I believe that more has to happen. It is very difficult for us. We have made several presentations to health bodies, for example. I served on the western transport forum. Health representatives on that forum really wanted to involve community transport, as they said that we could save them money. Indeed, they had us make a presentation to some of the top people in the Western Trust. We thought that the presentation, which was done by representatives from Fermanagh and Strabane, as well as by me, was pretty well received. However, we never heard another thing from them.

Last week, Easilink made a presentation that touched on the uneconomical runs that are done. The reason that we were approached by the Western Trust is that it found that some runs were uneconomical. I will give one example. In Limavady, I watch a £75,000 bus taking four or five people to a day care centre. The driver parks the bus up, puts his feet on the steering wheel, gets out the paper and reads it all day before taking those four or five people back. As a transport manager, I know that that is hugely costly. There is the depreciation in the value of the bus, the cost of insurance, the driver's wages, fuel costs — the lot — to consider. If that bus were not there and we were employed to do that small run, that £75,000 could be put into front line health services. That is why we need the integration of transport.

Mr Dallat: Billy, I listened very carefully to your presentation. If we could take your model, put it into a report and replicate it across Northern Ireland, I would say that your trip here today had been well worthwhile. However, you said that you made a presentation to the Western Trust but never heard from it again. We, collectively, want to ensure that your vast experience can be spun out to the benefit of the rest of Northern Ireland. I am very conscious that good practice is sometimes highly dependent on the individuals who are carrying it out. I am forced to sit and look at that picture of the Assembly on the wall over there, and I am aware that only 27 of the original Members are still here. I am not preaching your demise. However, what could we put into our report to ensure that your experience of amalgamations and all that stuff is used to give us a model of community transport in the future that is fit for purpose? You are right: previous experiments have failed, and people do not listen.

Mr Moore: Mr Dallat, thank you very much. My first thought is that the Departments need dialogue with each other. We have a fear about what is happening with DOE at the moment. I think that I made this point at a previous meeting, but I ask this Committee to engage with the Committee for the Environment to discuss the impact that those changes could have on communities, because that is the key. If you sat down and looked at it, you would realise the damage that could be done by ticking a box. Our communities could be destroyed by that. So, I believe that that dialogue is the starting point.

We are at ground level. We know exactly what people need. We have worked with them, and we know them by their first names now. This will not go away. If these changes are made to the operator's licence, the situation will only get worse. Volunteers and community hubs will disappear. I ask this Committee to please talk to the Committee for the Environment to try to ensure that some of the proposed changes are looked at again.

The Chairperson: Billy, to clarify for you and members, we are calling DOE officials to the Committee to discuss the licensing issues that we have about heard loud and clear from not only you today but other witnesses in previous weeks.

Mr Dallat: I am sure that other members will agree that it is not often that people take the trouble to write to you to say that something is good. I am happy to put it on the record that I regularly get letters from older people from across that geographical area from Ballycastle to Limavady who deeply appreciate the type of service that is on offer. They are generally people who had a car for a lifetime. They are no longer mobile, but they feel privileged that they are still able to make appointments and so on that they would not have been able to do otherwise. I think that our report would be highly valuable if it could protect those people by producing a model that delivers that service.

Ms McGinnis: Thank you for your kind remarks. I have been part of the merger from day one. I thank Billy, our manager, for his incredible vision. We also received very strong support from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Community Transport Association, as well as the best legal advice. Everything worked along the way, because the best people were engaged in the merger. Lots of days were spent going up and down and treating individuals. It involved TUPE and so forth. It is thanks to everybody that we have a very strong model today. That model works very well; it is very successful, and we are very proud of it.

The Chairperson: Finally, Billy, I want to ask you about the new transport section that the Department has announced. In your view, will that new body in the Department fulfil the scope of integrating public transport across all the relevant sectors?

Mr Moore: I am not clear about either that body or your question.

The Chairperson: The Department has announced that there will be a body in the Department — I am not sure whether it has a name yet — to oversee the scoping. Maybe I am not explaining this very well. There will be a joined-up approach involving all the relevant sectors, including your sector, health and so on. I just wondered whether you had any views on that. However, if you are not au fait with the announcement that has been made, it is probably better —

Mr Moore: I would not say that I am au fait with it. However, as we mentioned, it has been shown that the integration of services is very important. I look at transport, and I see that there is Translink, community transport, health transport and education transport. I know that there is efficiency to be made somewhere in there if we could all come together. Budgets are limited, and they are getting tighter and tighter. We fear that the people in need will be affected, as it is always the most vulnerable who seem to suffer. There is probably enough money in all those budgets to deliver to meet the needs of the people, but it will not happen if we all work in isolation.

The Chairperson: That was a very helpful presentation, and I thank you for it. I am sure that we will speak to you again at some stage. In the meantime, thank you. I wish you well. There were certainly some very favourable comments about your operation, so I congratulate you on that.